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Black Consciousness and Gender

Since the advent of South Africa's democratic dispensation, discourse on gender, and particularly the role of women in society, has gained prominence. Enshrined in the Constitution are certain inalienable rights that guarantee girls and women equality under the law. The African National Congress, the governing party since 1994, has gone so far as to mandate that women comprise 50% of their leadership; and indeed, South Africa has one of the highest rates of female representation in its parliament globally. Yet, paradoxically, South Africa also has one of the highest incidences of reported rape anywhere in the world. Further, women in our country, as is the trend globally, are disproportionately poor and carry the greatest disease burden.

Confronted with this contradiction, there are moments on the national calendar in which South Africa pauses to consider the role of women in society: to celebrate their contributions and to examine their challenges. As South Africa concluded the 16 days of activism against the abuse of women and children and celebrated the 66th birthday of Steve Biko last month, we at the Steve Biko Foundation take a moment to consider Black Consciousness and Gender.

In this, the fifth edition of the FrankTalk

Journal, we reflect on the ways in which the ideology of Black Consciousness (BC) historically contributed to the liberation of women, and the ways in which this philosophy continues to shape feminist thinking in the 21st century. With that said, we also explore the short-comings of BC and the Black Consciousness Movement in advancing gender equality. Our hope is that this issue of the FrankTalk journal will provide another framework through which to understand these topics—and make real notions of equality.

To lead us into this discussion, we are pleased to bring you contributions from four individuals who have reflected on Black Consciousness and Gender in their various capacities as feminist scholars, political analysts and activists.

We look forward to bringing you more perspectives on contemporary socio-economic and political issues in the coming editions of the journal and invite you to share your contributions with us via email:

dibuseng@sbfb.org.za or the FrankTalk Blog www.sbf FrankTalk.blogspot.com.

Continue the dialogue through Facebook www.facebook.com/TheSteveBikoFoundation and Twitter www.twitter.com/BikoFoundation.



NKOSINATHI BIKO

Chief Executive Officer of the Steve Biko Foundation

"One must immediately dispel the thought that Black Consciousness is merely a methodology or a means towards an end." Steve Biko

Black Consciousness

A Mind of One's Own

By Mohau Pheko



AMBASSADOR MOHAU PHEKO

Mohau Pheko is currently the South African ambassador to Japan. This comes after her post as South African high commissioner to Canada. As a political economist, Mohau Pheko is one of the most respected voices in development economics. A specialist in the position of women in economics, Pheko has worked as a consultant to Southern African governments and companies and for numerous international programmes. In 1998 she set up the Motheho Integrity Consultants, a company which specialises in providing economic research, policy and literature to parliamentarians, civil servants and women's organisations. Pheko is also coordinator of Gender and Trade Network in Africa.

"Black Consciousness is a tool that makes it easier to scrutinise in particular, the way in which representations work to enslave or liberate African women, reinforce or challenge racism in whites, and sustain or subvert white supremacy."

Almost every canonised Western philosopher is on record as viewing women as inferior, incompetent, or disqualified epistemic or moral agents. There are social arrangements that subordinate or oppress women which are served and protected by patterns of belief and social interactions that make truths about women's subordination and its alternatives hard to recognise, or easy to cover up.

Black Consciousness makes such social orders costly if not impossible. This consciousness keeps certain testimonies impeachable where they nonetheless emerge. To this general end it helps to have discredited certain categories of testifiers in advance. So it has been with women and Black Consciousness and the societies it informs.

Steve Biko in "The Quest for a True Humanity," *I Write What I Like* says "We do not want to be reminded that it is we, the indigenous people, who are poor and exploited in the land of our birth. These are concepts which the Black Consciousness approach wishes to eradicate from the black man's mind before our society is driven to chaos by irresponsible people from Coca-Cola and hamburger cultural background."

This easily translates into a clear message; we women do not want to be reminded that it is we, who are poor and exploited in the land of our birth. For me, an African woman, Black Consciousness as espoused by Steve Biko is a necessary step to owning, shaping and celebrating the black mind. This leads one to what I call a mind of one's own. It asserts African women as authoritative speakers, credible witnesses, thinking subjects and reflectively responsible moral agents.

Black Consciousness has contributed to the women's movement a literacy that is essential to the future of the movement because the lack of reading, writing and critical skills serves to exclude many women from consciousness. Not only that, it excludes many from the political process and the labour market. I regard literacy as more than being able to read and write. I refer to the literacy that enables women, particularly those who

are marginalised and discriminated against in society, to acquire a critical consciousness. This literacy is a critical consciousness for interrogating racism and sexism. It helps examine the representations of African women and African life in literature and popular culture.

It helps us figure out how these representations enhance and undermine the capacity of African women to determine their own fate. Black Consciousness is a tool that makes it easier to scrutinise in particular, the way in which such representations work to enslave or liberate African women, reinforce or challenge racism in whites, and sustain or subvert white supremacy.

Black Consciousness reminds us that white lives and African lives are doubtless just as segregated today as ever. Now, however, we watch a lot of images of African women on TV and in other media. The presence of such images creates an illusion of familiarity, a 'sisterhood' of sorts, a kind of simulated integration. Yet few of these images are produced by African people, or challenge stereotypes of African women. In terms of race, class, and gender, white people talk about "the black family," "unemployed black women," or whomever, as if they know what they are talking about- as if African people were speaking instead of being spoken about. Their conversations create the illusion that they know African people's lives.

Black Consciousness for African women has been essential for women's consciousness raising in terms of challenging ideas that run counter to values and beliefs that advance the status of women in our society. It has given impetus for women to refuse to conform to someone else's image of who and what they should be and to a large extent have the opportunity through the ideas of Black Consciousness to reinvent themselves.

In reinventing themselves, African women through Black Consciousness have entered the contested terrain of power that tends to distribute power in an asymmetrical manner between men and women, white and black. Among those powers is the power to name



Picture courtesy of Durban University of Technology

and describe things, to find and attest to fact, to be an arbiter of interpretation, to speak for oneself, in public, or with authority, to speak credibly on a multitude of issues and places, or to speak at all.

The challenge for Black Consciousness is for African women to produce a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness. It would just be attention grabbing for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what's going on with

whiteness. Race is always an issue of otherness that is not white; it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even. Yet only persistent, rigorous and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination.

"It seems to me that crucial questions of 'race', values, identity, culture, new intellectual frames, and social and cultural transformation that S.A.S.O and Black Consciousness raised remain highly relevant in our own time."

The Role of BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS in Redefining Contemporary Black Masculinity

By Busisiwe Deyi



MS BUSISIWE DEYI

Busisiwe Deyi is a queer transfeminist/feminist and human rights activist. She graduated with her LLB from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and went on to graduate with her Masters (LLM) in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa from the Human Rights Centre, University of Pretoria. She is interested in gender and sexuality politics and how these interact with culture, religion and human rights.

To understand the role of black consciousness in redefining black masculinity and the role it still has to play within the politics of sexuality and gender, one has to first understand the psychosexual and political structures that have been created by the history of oppression in South Africa and how that has influenced how South African black men have conceptualised their masculine identities in relation to womyn; how black men have defined themselves within an oppressive system; and what that means for the psychological development of the black man in contemporary South Africa. Black Consciousness sought to redefine the black man's identity. In his FrankTalk article entitled *We Blacks*, Steve Biko put forward the argument that in order for the black man to retain his manhood he needed to infuse the empty shell he had become through an "inward-looking process." Essentially, what Biko was calling for was a recreation of black masculinity and dignity through a recapturing of our distorted history.

The argument I put forward in this paper is a similar one to his and puts

forward that black masculinity has been defined along the oppressor/oppressed binary of apartheid and patriarchy, characterised by dichotomies of inferiority and superiority, sub-ordination and power. South African black men have centred their identity around sub-oppressor-dom and as a result of this formulation, the challenge that has been brought to this identity by the empowerment of black womyn through feminism and womyn enlightenment has backed black men into an existential crisis of disempowered eunuchism. Pushing him into a corner where he

"One found black womyn bleaching their skin and straightening their hair so as to attain affirmation of their humanity through an artificial manipulation of their physical appearance, and thereby defining whiteness as beautiful and better."

is overwhelmed by a sense of being overburdened by societal, economic and political responsibility.

Apartheid as an oppressive system, sought to create a societal paradigm within which it could justify its existence. Therefore, in order to justify the oppression of black people, it legitimised oppression through the labelling of certain categories of people as inferior, blacks, and others superior, whites, thus founding a basis for justifying a separatist and oppressive system of "development." Situating those deemed superior as the guardians and benefactors of that system.

The entire apartheid system was therefore geared towards the reinforcement of the ideology of the inferiority inherent within black people. What Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* calls the "dehumanisation of the oppressed group."

Because the standard of superiority then became defined as inherently all things white, the standard yardstick used to measure and judge progress, whether intellectual, social or economic is based on white supremacist norms and values. The norms and values of white society are viewed as the standards which one should strive for in order to attain some sort of affirmation of their humanity. It is within this psycho-social dynamic that within the oppressed group then emerges what Freire called the sub-oppressor, a portion of the oppressed group which believes that in order to attain affirmation and thus to be humanised they have to emulate the oppressor. Thus they become oppressors themselves.

The sub-oppressor group and the sub-oppressor ideology can be seen and has manifested itself in various forms and in various groups throughout history. Among womyn, one found

black womyn bleaching their skin and straightening their hair so as to attain affirmation of their humanity through an artificial manipulation of their physical appearance, and thereby defining whiteness as beautiful and better.

In the history of amaXhosa there is the historical rivalry between amagqoboka and amaqaba, the former representing the “civilised” western norms, those that had literally broken through the barrier of backwardness of traditional xhosa culture and embracing the promise of civilisation through Christianity and whiteness or white-likeness. Perhaps the best story told illustrating the historical kidnapping of Xhosa intellectualism and tradition is the story of the Xhosa preacher, Ntsikana. The missionary agent is said to have, after a spiritual encounter with a gale force wind, thrown aside his blanket and plunged into the water and washed the red ochre that had decorated his body.

Luzuko Gongxeka, analyses Ntsikana’s act of conversion as an act of betrayal and a forsaking of Xhosa traditions and cultural identity. He further opines that amagqoboka were intellectual traitors whose conversion mandated that they seek to convert their unconverted brothers and sisters through “an intellectual blackmail that treated them as the embodiments of backwards and were encouraged to doubt the wealth of their own wisdom insofar as faith and belief were concerned.”

Throughout history, the internalisation of the oppression by the oppressed group and the re-externalisation, through assuming the identity of the oppressor is an acknowledged and perhaps inevitable anthropological-social development

within the oppressed group.

It was this assimilation into white society and the measurement of “progress” by adhering to societal norms and standards of behaviour as “set up by and maintained by whites.” Biko was vehemently against what he saw as “the perpetuation of the superior- inferior white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil.” Biko rightly saw the group of sub-oppressors as a danger to the community. What Biko proposed was an integration of black and white that was based on mutual respect and dignity of both parties. Only when the black man was empowered in his own right and could make contributions to social reform from a position of dignified equality would black and white integration be possible.

However an aspect that Biko failed to examine or did not examine to its fullest extent was the possibility that black men had, by virtue of being socialised within a system that defined their very existence, a system that disempowered blacks not only financially but politically, morally, intellectually and spiritually, become sub-oppressors of womyn. Apartheid amplified and compounded on an already existing oppressive system, patriarchy. Patriarchy, being the less obvious but more ubiquitous, characterised by male domination and female subordination and oppression, seeped its way into the very construction of our society thus being “normalised” and adhering to our cultural and traditional practices.

A seemingly traditional practice such as ukweluka (male initiation), became an avenue through which patriarchy reinforced a culture of male domination through a validation of

“Apartheid amplified and compounded on an already existing oppressive system, patriarchy.”

black men’s manhood. Womynhood was validated through subservient acts. Even if the acts were not inherently subservient, they were characterised as such because they were a task only womyn could do e.g. breastfeeding, childrearing and looking after the home.

Our patriarchal customs went even further by only recognising a womyn if she was attached to a male. In birth it was her father, and in adulthood, it was her husband and should she not have either one of these, she would most likely be labelled a witch. Apartheid did not create female oppression, it reinforced systems and social norms of oppression already maintained by patriarchy.

And both systems, apartheid and patriarchy, operated separately and collectively to further oppress the black womyn and surround her within a reality and historical paradigm that was and is still defined by subordination and powerlessness. The liberation of the black womyn has impaled black man between his masculinity- as defined within the superior-inferior paradigm of apartheid- and the evolving role of the black womyn within our current political and social landscape.

When the feminist movement conflated the personal and the public, thus bringing light to the instances of oppression and subjugation that happened in what was thought to be private and intimate spaces, the kitchen and the bedroom, this limited the spaces through which the black men could empower himself.

In other words, when the black man was humiliated outside the home, by a police officer asking him for his pass, by being referred to as a “boy” by the children of his employer, when he had to stand naked before an employment officer- barely older than his first child-

“Their homes became spaces through which they could reclaim their masculinity and womyn became the emotional conduits to affirm their manhood and to reclaim their humanity.”

Crowds gathered daily, outside the Old Synagogue during the inquest into the death of Steve Biko



Picture courtesy of Andrzej Sawa, Avusa

"The culmination of all this has produced a black man who is largely emotionally and socially stagnant, a man who understands his masculinity only in terms of domination, subordination, superior-inferior societal power structures. A man who sees lesbian-masculine-identifying womyn as a challenge to his manhood because she represents the 'unowned' womyn, the womyn outside the superior-inferior, power-subordination paradigm."

who would check his genitalia, when the frustrations built up in him because of his everyday hostile and abrasive contact with the apartheid system, he could release his frustrations in his private space by being a "man" at home. This is to say that although many black men were treated as perpetual children in their contact with the mechanisms of apartheid, they could and had a space to vent out their anger and be men at home.

Their homes became spaces through which they could reclaim their masculinity and womyn became the emotional conduits to affirm their manhood and to reclaim their humanity. In other words, their externalisation of their frustrations, through violence, became a process of self-humanisation, a pseudo-affirming process. By dehumanising their wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters, they humanised themselves. Even Biko acknowledged the dual personalities -and the spaces associated with each personality- the black man had to have in order to manoeuvre and manipulate his way through the system of apartheid.

The permeation of womyn enlightenment meant that the spaces through which men could assert their masculinity drastically decreased. As the language of womyn enlightenment became everyday language that invaded "private" spaces through various mediums, the space to be a man shrank. But with the shrinking of "masculine" space no alternative was built, no alternative definition of masculinity was offered, no alternative masculine spaces were created. This is largely because there was no proactive attempt to re-conceptualise the black man's identity, there was no "inward-looking process," no black-masculine consciousness.

There was no attempt at a debate on and no exploration of what masculinity meant outside the superior-inferior, powerful-subordinate societal paradigm. Thus there was no language through which the black man could voice out his frustrations and his existential fears as his masculinity and the space to express that masculinity was redefined for him, as his reality was torn apart and the womyn was placed squarely in the middle of it, so he resorted to the only language he knew, violence.

The culmination of all this has produced a black man who is largely emotionally and socially stagnant, a man who understands his masculinity only in terms of domination, subordination, superior-inferior societal power structures. A man who sees a lesbian-masculine-identifying womyn as a challenge to his manhood because she represents the "un-owned" womyn, the womyn outside the superior-inferior, power-subordination paradigm.

A man who views gay men as a threat to the male privilege supported by patriarchy because he willingly assumes a submissive position by allowing himself to be penetrated and enjoys the penetration. A man who sees gang rape as a form of male bonding and a means of solidifying his masculinity. A man in crisis.

The role of Black Consciousness should be and must be to re-construct the black man, it must make him aware that by defining masculinity in terms of prevailing power paradigms is to assimilate, replicate and perpetuate oppression within the black community. Black Consciousness needs to position itself squarely in the centre of this introspective process in order to allow black men to begin having the necessary conversations about what it means to

be a black man with an enlightened black womyn or man by his side. Black Consciousness needs to be positioned as a mirror, as it was in its inception, to the brutal realities of the current condition of the soul of the black man. This can be done through the initiation of conscious-raising spaces, where men can meet, secluded, away from womyn and begin to talk about what is lacking in their masculine experiences.

Conclusion

Black men need to begin to redefine themselves outside the dominant forms of masculinity which depend on the oppressive mechanisation of power, a power which derives its authority/ dominance from dependency and weakness of womyn.

The current forms of masculinity position black men as sub-oppressors of black womyn. These masculinities are dangerous because their existence is based upon the continued weakness of black womyn. Thus a black womyn whose identity does not fit within the dependent-feminine paradigm is seen as a threat and banished to the land of unwomynly creatures. This is how society sanctions "disobedient" womyn, by shaming and ridiculing them into submission, by men and womyn alike tagging her with all kinds of labels i.e witch, umtakati, unongayindoda etc. Womyn susceptible to these labels are widows, womyn in old age- usually unmarried or widowed. If a womyn crosses over into the sacred realm of maleness and seeks to encroach upon male authority or power i.e lesbian womyn or transgender men, then she is killed.

This is because the current black masculinity is defined within a dichotomous power paradigm based on authority and dependency. It is precisely because black masculine power is based upon authoritarian power that it is so weak. It is because without womyn's dependence it cannot continue to exist and thus is easily placed into crisis when it clashes with womyn who are "un-owned" or autonomous.

Sources:

1 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

2 V. Booi, Chapter 2 *Ntsikana African Intellectuals in 19th and early 20th Century, South Africa*.

3 Conversation had on 13 July 2012, Luzuku Gongxeka.

4 S. Biko 'Black souls, White skins' *I Write What I Like*.

5 S. Biko 'We Blacks' *I Write What I Like*, pg 30.

"The role of Black Consciousness should be and must be to re-construct the black man."

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS and Feminism

By Rozena Maart

In this article, I lay out the extent to which Black Consciousness has influenced me—first through the writings of Bantu Stephen Biko, then Frantz Fanon—then offer some insights into how it has informed my work as a feminist scholar working within Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Literature and Gender Studies.

When the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) emerged in December of 1968 (then as SASO) it heralded a new beginning in the lives of young men and women in South Africa. I was 14 years old in 1976 but the years prior, at least from 1973 at age eleven and a half when my family along with a quarter of million residents were forcibly removed from District Six, the old slave quarter, brought the need within me like many teenagers of my background to examine our lives and that of the events around us. My grandparents were devastated by the forced removal so were the rest of the older generation of the District Six community. Many within our community were heart broken and the mental collapse of their bodies was visible to me as a young teenager. When pamphlets with Steve Biko's writings on it were distributed across the Cape Flats, and at Steenberg High School where I was a student, it was the first time that I became aware of the term consciousness and painfully learnt how I had acquired my own, however limited or inadequate. More importantly, in reading one particular pamphlet wherein the definition of Black Consciousness was defined then explained as a process, which through various forms of self-interrogation and self-examination required us to look at how, through examples from our lived experience, we participated in destructive pigmentation politics, my eyes were opened to the systematic conditioning of the mind. For it is the mind, as Biko reiterated in those pamphlets, that was (and

remains) central to the process of colonisation and thus central to the process of decolonisation. The writings of Biko remained central to my thinking in the days that led to my completion of matric, into my university days at the University of Western Cape (UWC), and certainly fuelled my determination to be in Mitchell's Plain in July of 1983 when the United Democratic Front (UDF) was launched in the Cape Province.

Steve Biko's Words Spoke to Me

At UWC lecturers like Yvonne Muthien and Marie Macdonald, both influenced by Black Consciousness became mentors and ensured that discussion took place within our classes where gender was on the agenda, and where rape and sexual assault were discussed as political issues, despite the fact that our male comrades within the Students Representative Council (SRC) thought it was irrelevant, insisting that we had to wait for the time to come when it would be on the political agenda—in other words, after the men had come!

In 1986, I was part of a group of black women, who founded the first black feminist organisation, Women Against Repression (WAR), in Cape Town. Many people had asked me

"The leadership within the anti-apartheid movement put forward an analysis of apartheid, with racism as its key tenet, as central to an understanding of why we were oppressed as women – apparently because as black men and women we were oppressed as a nation."



PROFESSOR ROZENA MAART

Rozena Maart is an Associate Professor and Head of Gender Studies at the University of KwaZulu Natal. She was born in District Six, Cape Town, went to Steenberg High School and thereafter took her undergraduate degree at the University of Western Cape. She took her Master's degree at the University of York, UK, in 1988 and her doctoral degree at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, UK, in Political Philosophy and Psychoanalysis. She works within the intersections of Political Philosophy, Black Consciousness, Derrida and deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory and Feminist Theory. At age 24 in 1987 she was nominated as "woman of the year," for her work in the area of violence against women and for starting, with four women, the first Black feminist organisation in South Africa, Women Against Repression in the previous year.

then, and still today, why repression and not oppression. Repression speaks to systemic, systematic and institutionalised forms of oppression and persecution of an individual and a group, where violence, coercion and measures designed to humiliate are employed by a regime in order to entrench self-hatred and self-destruction; it also speaks to the psychological aspects of oppression, which include internalised racism, sexism and homophobia, which we wanted to draw attention to, both in terms of male domination and apartheid. As it happens, the organisation in its small life transitioned from WAR, a black woman's organisation to an organisation which also included white women and renamed Organisation of People Against Sexism (OPAS). Our allies who joined shared our understanding of a critique of male domination, and sexism as a consequence of it (that it is intertwined with colonialism, racism and capitalism) and were drawn to our protest politics which they soon participated in because of their outrage at violence against women both within the larger society and within the very anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist organisation out of which our activism emerged. A small number of men lent their support to OPAS through various activities, some of which included spray painting our version of how The Freedom Charter could be interpreted from a black feminist point of view since it was quoted to us so regularly as a deterrent when our concerns about rape and sexual assault were voiced as central to our anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist politics.

During the 1980s as the activism of OPAS now became a problem for male teachers who sexually abused their students, who could no longer guarantee that their arrival at school would not be met with the protests of OPAS women, various men in the UDF and trade union leadership called us aside to ensure that we were adequately educated. The leadership within the anti-apartheid movement put forward an analysis of apartheid, with racism as its key tenet, as central to an understanding of why we were oppressed as women—apparently because as black men and women we were oppressed as a nation. The leadership within anti-capitalist organisations, including those within trade unions, asserted that it was our exploitation as workers, mere appendages of capitalism that defined our identities as black women. In

summation: only through national liberation, as in the former position, and the dismantling of capitalism as in the latter, would women's oppression and women's exploitation be eradicated. Of course, when confronted with the realities of rape and sexual assault, which many of them contributed to, it was either women's fault or an act that was testimony to how men suffered and therefore lashed out at women, all in all, that male violence was an unfortunate aftermath of apartheid and capitalism. Whilst both of these positions lacked logic and intelligence of large proportions we were expected to accept this without question; even the basic assertion that black women also worked, whether in factories, offices or in the home and should therefore according to their logic also be prone to inflicting rape and sexual assault was treated as antagonistic and retroactive to the struggle.

Many of us as black women who openly called ourselves feminists were also tired of white women who wanted to relate to us on the grounds of our shared oppression as women under patriarchy yet those very same white women did not have an analysis of "race" and colonialism, and certainly did not situate themselves within the very system of apartheid, and its baby child racism, they claimed to be against and from which they benefitted. Above and beyond these historical facts enacted by them within contemporary apartheid, they did not see themselves as oppressing black men either and therefore readily spoke of patriarchy—the belief system and world-view, justified through inaccurate interpretations of religious texts, culture, among others, in order to justifiably exert dominance over women often explained as the rule of the father. Their interest was in highlighting the belief system of male domination, not the male domination black women spoke of—certainly not their own role in oppressing black men through the various channels made available to them via the mechanisms

of the apartheid state in order to offer them a life as colonials within South Africa.

To many white women "race" was, and remains still today, either an add on, reluctantly, when made aware of it, or part of a historical past, which black women somehow have to forget if joined in the struggle to end women's oppression and exploitation as feminists. What made Biko's words so instrumental to my youth and the analysis that I developed over the years as a consequence of it was that I learnt very early about the materiality of "race," a matter Marx was ignorant of in his formal writings but readily utilised when he wanted to humiliate Ferdinand Lasalle as is evidenced in his letters to Engels, and which his analysis of historical materialism failed to account for. Biko was very clear: as agents of a system of white domination, white men and white women were first and foremost beneficiaries of the system. Biko's understanding of agency, of how the mind is carried within the body, and the body—the flesh of consciousness not just the philosophical concept to which individuals attach themselves simply by saying so—is what is crucial in understanding the role we play in either perpetuating, maintaining and reproducing the very system we claim to be against or, as Tunisian writer and scholar Albert Memmi asserts in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, actively refusing it. It is from Biko's conceptualisation of Black Consciousness, and the writings used for workshop purposes in the development of SASO, most of which now form the contents of *I Write What I Like*, that I began to examine the works of North African and Caribbean scholar-cum-revolutionaries who shared his analysis and vision. It is through these combined works, and with a focus on Memmi's chapter, "The Colonizer that Refuses," that I write on The Politics of Refusal, in my work on White Consciousness, wherein I argue the participation of white scholars, steeped in the European tradition of thinking, in the perpetuation of White Mythology (as per the writings of Algerian Philosopher Jacques Derrida's) as White Consciousness.

The Politics of Refusal forms part of a larger segment of my work on "When Black Consciousness Meets White Consciousness," and documents some of the work with white feminists and white men who both claim an anti-racist position and who claim to want

*"As a black feminist,
I have often said that
I learnt to strengthen
my feminism
through the writing
of Biko and
Black Consciousness
revolutionaries."*

"No gender analysis can exist without the broader context of understanding the historical and contemporary construction of White domination, and its ideological basis, white supremacy."

to learn from Black Consciousness and black feminism. I am here talking about students, various people I teach and continue to interact with in workshop settings, scholars and revolutionaries I have worked with in scholarly contexts at annual conferences in the past twenty years, and those I currently interact with. I did not start out my academic career working with white folks; white students signed up for my classes faster than black students because they wanted to equip themselves with what they believed, at first, was black feminist anti-racist language and discourse, in order to get access to the cream-de-le-cream of the job market in Canada, where anti-oppression and anti-racism feature prominently in job descriptions. They learnt, rather painfully, that they had to locate themselves within the very racism they claimed to be against, and within the very colonialism and neocolonialism the tucked away reservations where Indigenous people were forced onto in order to make way for their privileged white lives, had to be visualised, and that they had to give an account of it. More importantly—that my pedagogical position matched my politics.

When students come to my classes and to my workshops at conferences, they learn about agency, first and foremost. I place a lot of emphasis on agency in all of what I do. It is our flesh, and it is through our flesh, as bodies, that we act, and we have to act in order to reproduce or maintain the society we live in; if we don't want to maintain it, and we find it goes against what we believe in then we have to learn to challenge it first of all with self-examination and self interrogation; we have to learn to place the self at the centre of the transformative process. How can we have thoughts and ideas about a world, when we do not place ourselves within it, and how do we do that? By asking ourselves what it is that we do in this very world from which

we extract thoughts and ideas, from which we claim to study. For, as we know, despite what we claim about our consciousness, it is not the mind that acts but the body—agency, the flesh, the human being, who acts because of his consciousness. Consciousness does not act through psychic measures but through a commitment that we have to put ourselves on the line—and for white folks, that they have to relinquish their white privilege, however fond they have become of it.

As a black feminist, I have often said that I learnt to strengthen my feminism through the writing of Biko and Black Consciousness revolutionaries. This has come as a surprise to white feminists on a number of occasions who readily draw my attention to the all male SASO and to the referencing of the generic "man" which black man have used in their writings yet seem to come up with solid scholarly arguments for why black people are either absent from the text or when present, forged within the text as death, about to be killed, enslaved, en route to death and genocide. And here I am not even referring to the obvious slap-you-in-the-face- racism of Hegel and de Beauvoir, for example, who can only talk about black woman as la noire. There is la femme (woman) and then there is la noire (the Black). Black women, accordingly, are not afforded the term woman in de Beauvoir's world: we simply exist as the feminised black.

Throughout my teenage years and early adulthood I have reflected on what I believe is the central focus of Biko's analysis—the mind. I later learnt that Biko, who trained to be a medical doctor, had studied the works of psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and the writings of Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) of the Oakland, California based Black Power Movement. Biko was influenced by Linguistic and Literature professor, Robert Sobukwe, and thus shared quite a lot in common with Martinican born Fanon. What makes the analogy between Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist, and Steve Biko, the trainee medical doctor, so special is that both their mentors, who specialised in language and literature were founder members of important organisations that served as the foundation for Black Consciousness in the Caribbean, North Africa, and South Africa—that is the Negritude Movement as in the case of Cesaire, and the Pan Africanist Congress as in the case of Sobukwe.

What is significant here is the training Fanon received through his psychiatric training, and his insistence in *Black Skin White Masks*, three pages into the text, "that only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of the affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex."

What Fanon shares with Biko, both trained in the medical field, is the focus on the psychoanalytic and the psychological—the former foregrounds consciousness as speech, as the utterance through which consciousness of self and consciousness of the other is determined all of which prioritises the interrogation of speech. What we learn from these two Black Consciousness revolutionaries is that language is central to Black Consciousness. Fanon's first chapter in *Black Skin White Masks* opens with a chapter on language; when Biko was on trial for treason, it was very much his Black Consciousness language that was on trial as it was his analysis, and the way that he used speech to enact his analysis, to challenge White Liberals who sought to tell him that Black Consciousness was divisive because their vision of so called non-racism, where they got to determine the plan for liberation, was the best way forward for Black people, which Biko challenged.

Black Consciousness, much like psychoanalysis, is first and foremost an inward looking process—that moment when the subject has to look at her self, her ego, and ask questions about her place in the world. Black Consciousness is a process—a long inward looking process, a reflection of mental attitude. It is not simply an acquired consciousness—it is not something someone hands you, it is pain, and you have to work for it.

Black Consciousness has been shaped by du Bois, C.L.R. James, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Leon Damas, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Steve Biko, Walter Rodney, Stokely Carmichael, Amilcar Cabral, James Ngugi and also by the Martinican Paulette Nardal and her sisters, Francis Baard and Lillian Ngoyi here in our country, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks and many black women who have identified the shortcomings of these male considerations of Black Consciousness yet seem to agree on many levels about the destructive impact that colonialism, imperialism and racism have on our

lives as black women. These women have shaped the Black Consciousness parameters with a transformed notion of Blackness, transforming it into a Black Consciousness of Totality—a Black Consciousness which needs to place black women's sexualities on the agenda; violence against women and not only colonialist violence, and gender inequality as derivative of an intertwined system of patriarchy, capitalism and racism. In addition, a Black Consciousness that recognises the complexities of black nationalism and the contradictions with which it holds a certain kind of contempt for black women. A Black Consciousness that paves new and revolutionary paths for black men with their participation.

Black Consciousness draws its ideology from orators, scholar-cum-activists, strategists and thinkers who have framed their political action in response to the history and reality of imperialism, colonialism, racism and racial capitalism. Black Consciousness

is an analysis, a political identification, a tool, a political movement and a commitment that moves beyond the requirements of assimilation but exists as a revolutionary commitment to rebel against acts which seek to subjugate the black identity and hold individuals accountable to the many relations of white domination.

No gender analysis can exist without the broader context of understanding the historical and contemporary construction of White domination, and its ideological basis, white supremacy. I say this with the full understanding that whilst I assert it strongly in my work, I do so precisely because it continues to be overlooked by scholars who claim feminist and anti-racist politics yet seem to ignore the larger presence of white supremacy within which we all live.

Today, eighteen years after the first democratic elections, the reported statistics on rape and sexual assault in our country are a global disgrace and

nothing short of genocide. Malcolm X was among the few black men within BCM to speak out against the sexual exploitation of black women. This was when he was still a member of the Nation of Islam. He cannot be the last black man to do so. So often I hear black men talk about their concern for rape and sexual assault in our country. Is it not high time that their protestations should be accompanied by a plan of action?

"Today, eighteen years after the first democratic elections, the reported statistics on rape and sexual assault in our country are a global disgrace and nothing short of genocide."

Winifred Kgware, 1st President of the Black People's Convention, outside the Old Synagogue, singing freedom songs



CONTRADICTIONARY LOCATIONS: **Black Women** and the Discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa

By Pumla Dineo Gqola



PROFESSOR PUMLA DINEO GQOLA

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"The superficial symbols of the denial of blackness are evident in the (formerly) widespread use of skin-lightening and hair-straightening agents by Black women" - Sibisi 1991

This paper examines the ambiguities and subtleties in how discourses of liberation as articulated in the early Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) of South Africa define the role and positions of the category "black women."

Background to the Black Consciousness Movement

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) emerged in the 1960s as a response largely to the political vacuum created by the relentless apartheid state repression and banning that characterised the post- Sharpeville era (Buthelezi 1991; Rive 1982; Wilkinson 1992). After the massacre at Sharpeville, the National Party government proceeded to ban the two largest political parties in the country at the time, the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), along with all the other formations and organisations that it saw as a threat to the policy of apartheid (Biko 1987; Buthelezi 1991; Mzamane 1991). This included individuals who had in various ways been actively opposed to apartheid; be it in or through politics, social activity, writing, or other means, thus effectively suppressing the ability of South African society to voice collective opposition to apartheid; a new form of opposition to the government policies had to emerge.

Black Consciousness is an ideology that found eloquence in the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) and as a consequence only became fully formulated within and by this student body. Sipho Buthelezi (1991) argues that SASO itself came into being

in the late 1960s when black students at universities in South Africa felt the need to represent their opinions and to generate solidarity among the country's Black population. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), which had until then been the only organisation for university students in South Africa and had placed itself in opposition to the apartheid establishment, was felt to be insufficiently progressive, as well as oblivious to the political needs of black students who experienced a sense of alienation and domination by white students even within its ranks (Arnold 1979; Budlender 1991; Wilson 1991). For example, at the NUSAS Congress held at Rhodes University in 1967,

"Steve Biko challenged NUSAS to take an active stance against the segregated residential facilities which Rhodes University had imposed on the congress. The university discriminated against black delegates: "Indians" and "Coloureds" had to stay in town while Africans were required to stay some distance away in a church location; whites, on the other hand, could stay in the university residences (Wilson 1991, 22)."

SASO was founded when black students realised the need for an organisation in which they had a say, one that would be representative of their opinions and aspirations and that would take cognisance of how they wanted to operate whilst simultaneously generating solidarity between the various black campuses (Buthelezi 1991). The move was towards a self-formulated way of life which necessitated, it was held in Black Consciousness, an organisational and conceptual separation from white society. Black people needed to be able to feel validated and affirmed in the absence of white people to be able to really realise their full potential. As Biko wrote in the editorial to Black Viewpoint 1972, what needed to change was that,

"so many things are said so often to us, about us and for us, but very seldom by us (1972, 1)."

What is now commonly recognised as Black Consciousness ideology only crystallised out of "the perception of the role of black students in their liberation" (Buthelezi 1991, 118). For a long time, Black Consciousness neither pretended to be the substitute / alternative nor an extension of the exiled liberation movements. In an article titled *The black thing...is honest...is human*, Black Consciousness activist and poet, Mafika Pascal Gwala writes:

The black who becomes aware of his blackness and its implications in a racist society will often strive, to a large measure of success or failure, for self-definition. This self-definition will take the form of a negation. That is neglecting all that has been imposed on him, super-imposed by white cultural values, white economic domination and white stratification of society. And when a man begins to negate he is refusing to see himself as a commodity. This is when the consciousness of contestation emerges. This contestation will bear an essentially black character. Black in its doubts about white superiority, its criticism of white values and its challenge of white right. This is when Black Consciousness takes form. Black Consciousness calls for a redefinition of concepts. Cultural, economic, social and theological concepts as seen by the black and seeing them through his own black self (1972, 13).

The power and success of apartheid can be attributed to, firstly, its emphasis on division and differences, and secondly, to its ability to constantly reinforce a negative self image in those it sought to subjugate. If apartheid worked well because it divided black people, Black Consciousness realised that the most effective tool against racism as a force was black solidarity. As a starting point then, Black Consciousness redefined "black" as a racial marker to include all South Africans on the receiving end of historical discrimination grounded in race. Black self-redefinition was perceived as crucial to toppling the power structure which, under apartheid, was identified as primarily based on race (Gwala 1972). A crucial step in this direction was seen to be mental emancipation, or as labelled by Black Consciousness, psychological liberation. This liberation entailed a rejection of the values that sustained white society to the detriment of black society. Where white society labelled

everything black (and by extension black) as degenerate and base, Black Consciousness emphasised positive images of blackness. In the English language particularly, "black" is used almost exclusively to refer to the sinister and undesirable. Black Consciousness recognised that there was a connection between this colour bias in language and the race prejudice in South African society.

Black Consciousness organisations such as the Black Community Programmes (BCP) developed and ran projects in black communities. These began, because, according to one of the founder activists of the BCM, Mamphela Ramphele, young activists recognised that their status as students accorded them privileges not available to the "toiling black masses." Students were thus urged to plough back their acquired skills into the community for the development of the poor (1991a, 156).

These community programmes ranged from assisting informal settlement communities to build more durable housing, health work carried out at several hospitals (and later BCP established clinics), to rural development projects.

Black Consciousness questioned the school version of history taught to black students. This contributed in part to a re-

"Black people needed to be able to feel validated and affirmed in the absence of white people to be able to really realize their full potential."

evaluation of aspects of black culture, for example, black art, music, orature, etc. As part of the move away from a white dominant culture, Black Consciousness advocated an embracing of the African past, embracing African socialism as captured in the writings of Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Leopold Senghor, and early Kwame Nkrumah (Nolutshungu 1983). In African socialist society everybody was a worker and it was taken for granted that each member, apart from children and the frail, would contribute towards the production of wealth (Nyerere 1991).

Black Consciousness activists and writers were suspicious of how aspects from traditional African culture and languages were used. This was mainly because of the manner in which the Apartheid State had used both to foster "ethnic" divisions. The preferred route was that which saw values "sifted through, so that what was thought

Thenjive Mntso, former member of the Black Consciousness Movement and uMkhonto Wesizwe commander



Picture courtesy of HE Thenjive Mntso

Ntsiki Biko, wife of late Steve Biko and Steve Biko Foundation Board Member with Arun Nacker of Umtapo Centre



Picture courtesy of Durban University of Technology

valuable to the demands of the present could be selected and used (M. Langa quoted in Sole 1993, 25)."

Black Consciousness was highly critical of the role that Christianity had played in the subjugation and pacification of black people and therefore sought to find an alternative to the mainstream white version of Christianity which had been used to justify first colonisation and then apartheid. Biko (1987) argued that the Church was successful in defeating black liberation. Black Theology, similar to Liberation Theology in South America, adapted the Christian message to the black situation. It shaped the religion to one of relevance and suitability to the black masses in South Africa (Sargent 1990). It sought to infuse Christianity with flexibility and relevance to the lives of those marginalised by society. Christian messages and Christ's life specifically were used as liberating factors.

Biko had this to say about Black Theology; "The bible must not be seen to preach that all authority is divinely instituted. It must rather preach that it is a sin to allow yourself to be oppressed..." This is the message implicit in "Black Theology." Black Theology seeks to do away with the spiritual poverty of the black people. It seeks to demonstrate the absurdity of the assumptions by whites that "ancestor worship" was necessarily a superstition and that Christianity is a scientific religion.

Problems with Black Consciousness

I think that it is important to realise that the BCM came in a cultural environment where women, whether they were black or white, did not matter. It was not a peculiarity of the BCM to

focus on men. The language did not have space for women partly because it was a language borrowed from a culture, English culture, which never accepted women really as full citizens (Ramphela 1998, 92).

Firstly, Black Consciousness ideology rests on the unsatisfactory premise that race is the primary oppressive force for all those racially subjugated in South Africa. This supposition is puzzling in that it pronounces a hierarchy of oppression. It is also ironic that exploring the "primary" oppression invariably leads to the repudiation of all other forms of oppression. This is particularly so in an ideology which expressly seeks to eliminate injustice. As Kimberley Yates has pointed out,

"It is of significance that at the time of the BCM, the activist has available a ready-made masculinist discourse that had been used by many black nationalist struggles in other parts of the world, particularly Negritude and the US Black Power Movement. In addition to reading South African writers of the time, the activists were also reading the writings of activists from other black nationalist movements around the world (1997:16)."

These writers included Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, the Black Panthers, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Leopold

Senghor, Albert Memmi, George Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, and Paulo Freire (Ramphela 1991b, Moodley 1991). Bearing this in mind, and addressing herself to some of the historical evaluation of the movement, Yates cautions,

"But while it is true that there was an "ideological framework" available for Black Consciousness activists in the model of the US Black Power Movements, it is true that the very same framework was available in Negritude and other struggles throughout Africa. To argue that Black Consciousness took its impetus from that model denies the power of the circumstances in South Africa that gave rise to Black Consciousness, and it also denies black South Africans consciousness and awareness of the severely oppressive circumstances created and maintained by apartheid (1997, 24)."

Black Consciousness discourse betrays awkwardness around points of variation within the black community. This attitude in turn bears directly on the refusal of Black Consciousness to acknowledge that black society is not monolithic, that experiences of oppression(s) differ within the same community. Black Consciousness proponents avoided adopting a critical stance in relation to others outside the movement fighting in the struggle against apartheid. This therefore led to a situation where, in spite of its power as an ideology, the tendency to shy away from differences between black people proved to be one of the biggest areas of weaknesses for Black Consciousness. The quest for black solidarity took precedence over the need to criticise other black people and organisations opposed to apartheid. A press release by the SASO National Executive Committee (SASO Newsletter 1972) argues this point emphatically;

"With the political climate as it is today SASO expects the various political groups that operate outside the system to speak with a united voice against the present regime but not to waste time discrediting their fellow black brothers and sisters."

It appears from this statement that criticism was identified as a potentially divisive tactic, and difference was not explored as an area of possible strength. In its attempt to prioritise solidarity, Black Consciousness denied the existence of alternative views or experiences. Perhaps this was due in part to the fact that, as Trinh T. Minhha insists, "difference is not difference to some ears, but awkwardness or incompleteness

"I think that it is important to realise that the BCM came in a cultural environment where women, whether they were black or white, didn't matter."

(1989, 264).” This means, therefore, that despite its endeavour to unite all black South Africans, it prioritised and gave voice to a specific black experience of oppression, Black Consciousness presupposed also, that because all black people experience racism, that experience is not only uniform but also that coinciding meanings stemmed from it. It further assumed and continuously asserted race as the chief and perhaps the sole oppressive force in South Africa for all black people. This continued to be the case even when class was later acknowledged as an (additional) oppressive factor which existed in many black people’s lives. Due to its emphasis on racial solidarity as the only means towards the liberation of black people, it promised complete freedom at the end from all oppressive forces despite its reluctance to acknowledge their existence. The experiences of gender, class, age, geographical location, and sexual orientation were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of the doctrine.

In hindsight, Mamphela Ramphele writes, “It could be argued that it was our privileged position in society that gave us the space to play this role (1991b, 215);” what is voiced is the specific oppression of relatively educated black students (predominantly men) which forms only part of the overall oppression suffered by all other sectors of the black community. In not exploring the position from which the proponents of Black Consciousness spoke, numerous conjectures were made, and the ideal of liberating the majority of Black people in the country by winning them to the Black Consciousness way of life was essentially rendered unachievable, SASO members, because of their university education, were not fully representative of the broad spectrum of South African black people. Their education in a country where the majority of people were under-exposed to book education impacted on the accessibility and intellectual content of the ideology. This in turn thwarted Black Consciousness’s effectiveness when used with people who did not have the same conceptual skills or outlooks.

This should have received more attention. Merely asserting that black students should “consolidate themselves with the black masses, for they are black before they are students” was not sufficient to close the gap of (mis) understanding (SASO Newsletter 1972).

The issue of communication was

not the only difficulty with the ideology of Black Consciousness. There are fundamental problems with the way in which certain aspects of the positive “self” image are positioned. The image of the African past, for instance, is that of an idyllic golden age uncorrupted by white culture. In a desperate effort to portray a past unaffected by white values, it was presented as being without contradictions, Black Consciousness, in emphasising an idyllic past uncorrupted by white presence and influence, offered no explanations or recognition for the lack of complete peaceful coexistence between Africans in the pre-colonial era. It shied away from explaining social schisms in pre-colonial cultures and appeared to argue that there were no hierarchies in Southern Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans. Further, Black Consciousness claimed to direct itself towards complete liberation. However, patriarchal tendencies were unexamined as an obstacle to the liberation of all black people. Where questioning existed, it came from some of the few women within the upper rungs of SASO and other Black Consciousness organisations (Ramphele 1998). Self-identified feminist studies and critiques of this era are in agreement over not only the paucity of black women in the organisations of the BCM, but also of the conservative terms of their participation in this movement (Driver 1988a, Gqola 1999, Lewis 1991, Lewis 1994, Walker 1982). This is confirmed by activists in early Black Consciousness (Ramphele 1991b, Yates 1997).

Ramphele writes that, “women were... involved in the Black Consciousness Movement because they were black. Gender as a political issue was not raised at all (1991b, 215).” Kogila Moodley points to the similarities between the BCM and white society in the sexual division of labour. In both, women fit into “domestic roles, child care, moral education, and socialisation into black cultural heritage, health, nutrition and making clothing (Moodley 1991, 147).” Furthermore “this view of women permeated even women’s self-defined roles as is evident in the Preamble to the Constitution of Allied Black Women’s Federation (Moodley 1991, 147).” Black Review 1975/76 (143), quotes the aforementioned Preamble to read:

1. Black women are basically responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families and largely the socialisation of the youth for the transmission of the black cultural heritage.

2. The need to present a unified front and redirect the status of motherhood toward the fulfilment of the black people’s social, cultural, economic and political aspirations.

In her interview with Lindy Wilson, Thenjiwe Mtintso, another of the founder members of BCM, expresses related concerns thus: “they do want you to be political, to be active, to be everything, but they still need a complement of women who are subservient (Wilson 1991, 60).” Cheryl Walker, writing in 1982, writes of the predominantly conservative entry of black women in nationalist movements in South Africa, including Black Consciousness, and concludes that this is due, in part, to the discourses of nurturing and motherhood through which their roles are defined. There was reward for women who were motherly, nurturant, and domestic so that “it could be argued that black women benefited as people, because they also became more liberated as individuals (Ramphele, 1991b, 216).” As such, within Black Consciousness, “the ideology and culture in which women’s de facto empowerment occurs remains emphatically phallocratic (Lewis 1994, 162).”

Several black women in the BCM, however, emerge throughout the literature addressing itself to the early Black Consciousness era in South Africa as making their presence felt and opinions heard in early Black Consciousness. The names of Thembi Nkabinde, Manana Kgwane, Deborah Matshoba, Nomsisi Kraai, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Mamphela Ramphele, and Vuyelwa Mashalaba are associated with women in Black Consciousness who resisted the supportive and nurturing mold through which female participation in Black Consciousness was framed.

Their unusual stance presented a challenge to a BCM which was characterised by sexism in its discourse and operation. On the one hand, they were expected to fulfil the traditional roles which many allowed themselves to be placed in. On the other, they were required to be militant and able to assume roles which

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were similar to those of the men in the movement. The latter roles meant that their status was “masculinised” (Lewis 1994, 162) and that they were viewed as “honorary men,” supposedly different from other women because of the ability to think and participate in political debate and activity (Ramphela 1991b, 219; Ramphela 1998).

Thus, rather than immediately challenging the status quo, they were marked as “exceptional” women.

These women were not unaware of this contradiction: being “masculinised” or accorded “honorary male status” even as they explicitly challenged the sexism in the movement. As Ramphela (1998) recalls, these black women could grow “assertive, to the point of arrogance” placing themselves in direct disagreement with the taboos and limitations placed on women’s behaviour. In the substantial body of work she has produced on Black Consciousness, she pays considerable attention to “the constraints on the participation of women in public and political processes” in Black Consciousness organisations (1991b, 214). Outlining the establishment of the Black Women’s Federation in 1975, in Durban, she notes the absence of concern within the umbrella body with “special problems women experienced as a result of sexism both in the private and public sphere.

Women were important as wives, mothers, girlfriends and sisters, in fighting a common struggle against a common enemy. Scant regard was given to their position as individuals in their own right (1991b, 216).” However, it is important to note that the few women who were in leadership positions, “had to face the problem of resistance to their active participation by their “significant others” at home, as well as the danger of taking on a repressive political system and government” and needed to be “courageous, articulate people” since activism required unwavering “self-confidence, eloquence and dedication to endless meetings and discussions (Ramphela 1991b, 216-7).” This was a challenge even for Ramphela, who by her own admission required neither public approval nor applause in order to make her opinions known. In this sometimes hostile environment, she notes, “I soon learnt to be aggressive towards men who undermined women, both at the social and at the political levels. Socially one had to cope with being regarded as available to men, because one was single. One was also constantly told and

reminded that one was an exception to the male assumption that beauty and brains do not combine. One fell prey to the flattery implicit in such remarks and began to see oneself as different from other women. A major part of the process of being socialised into activist ranks was becoming ‘one of the boys’ (Ramphela 1991b, 218).”

In addition to the challenges of gender to the BCM, several South African critics have pointed to the presence of a middle class bias in an organisation founded predominantly by black men who were university students. While access to tertiary education and middle class status often accompany each other, and education is often seen as a “way out” of one’s class position, it is not an inevitable fact that access to tertiary education equals middle class status. Indeed several working class tertiary students have written to challenge this “fact.” In addition, as A. Sivanandan (1981) has repeatedly argued, the connections between race and class in apartheid South Africa made South Africa “an exceptional capitalist social formation in which race is class and class race- and the race struggle is the class struggle;” thus to overemphasise class differences in apartheid society is to ignore that ideology and not the relations of production determined racial consciousness (Sivanandan 1981, 333).

That having been said, however, Black Consciousness discourse negated the diversity in experiences and aspirations of black women in all classes and working class people of both genders. At the same time, it also claimed the right to speak for them, about them and to know their experiences. The intention seems to have been to, include as far as possible all blacks in a movement that would encompass all their concerns, political and otherwise, leaving outside only those who were irretrievably locked into collaboration roles with the “system” (Nolutshulungu 1983, 153).

“The experiences of gender, class, age, geographical location, and sexual orientation were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of the doctrine.”

The effect was that the ideology of Black Consciousness paid no attention to social contradictions (Ramphela 1991a, 177-8).

The Languages of Black Consciousness

Due to the inadequate manner in which black students were taught the English language whilst still at school, communication in English medium situations was fraught with challenges. Biko (in Arnold 1979) explains,

“you understand the paragraph but you are not quite adept at reproducing an argument that was in a particular book, precisely because of your failure to understand certain words in the book.”

Additionally, there is a difficulty in moving beyond a certain point of comprehension. The sensible choice appears to be communication in an African language. However, in a country with ten African languages, the issue of choice becomes a contentious one, since for practicality, as Biko explains, “we cannot speak all ten at one meeting (Arnold 1979, 28).” Furthermore, the apartheid government had used African languages to divide black people into Bantustans according to “tribal” divisions along language lines. The use of indigenous languages under the bantu education system “tended to reinforce apartheid and inculcate attitudes of inferiority and dependence (Mzamane 1991, 179).” It is against this background that the choice of English as the official Black Consciousness medium should be studied. As expressed by Mchunu and Mnguni the use of English “was a process of liberation itself to tell the oppressor in his language that blacks are no more afraid (1986, 99).” It was also the language in which the writings of other black thinkers at the time were available to Black Consciousness activists. This is therefore largely the language of the theories on race, class and nationalism.

It is important to note, however, that English was not inhabited unquestioningly by these activists, a fact particularly evident in the downright refusal to adhere to rules about formal and informal language. The choice of English had its advantages in that it did not allow for the connotations regarding difference and division which apartheid legislation had made synonymous with African languages. It also meant that the language or version of English used could be made to subvert the colour biases and prejudices of the standard version of the language as demonstrated by the assertion, “Black

Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, 1st president of the BCP, addressing congress at the BPC's first national congress in December, 1972. Extreme left, Winnie Kgware



Picture courtesy of Maybuye Archives

is Beautiful (Sole 1993).” Not so with the gender baggage. In English, the rallying cry of Black Consciousness became, “Black man, you are on your own.” Had the same sentiment been expressed in one of the indigenous languages of the country, the message would have been less exclusionary and would have meant “Black person, you are on your own.”

Luce Irigaray argues that “the generic male” means that all women safeguard the foundation of the symbolic order, without ever gaining access to it (Irigaray 1992, 96). The usage of “man” and “he” in Black Consciousness literature echoes the function of the two in standard English. This is supposedly the “generic state,” during which the male is symbolic of both male and female. Nevertheless,

it is important to register that the use of the masculine pronoun and “man” betrays something significant about Black Consciousness thought.

Wendy Martyna (1980) faults the usage of the “generic male” on three accounts. Foremost in these is the “non-parallelism” between male and female terms. Martyna holds that there is an instinctive contradiction between meaning and grammar when the “generic male” is used. The rules of English grammar prohibit the substitution of “woman” (or “she”) for “man” (or “he”) when the latter is used to mean “people” as opposed to adult males. This is so in spite of the claim that the use of the “generic male” is an arbitrary choice and used to avert verbosity. Secondly, there is the ambiguity which stems from the inability to differentiate between when women are included and when they are not. Lastly, she illustrates and problematises those situations where the “generic male” clearly excludes women (Martyna 1980, 69-70). Consequently, if “he” and “man” can both mean male only as well as all humanity, then women are constantly placed in a situation where there is neither certainty about what they are entitled to nor whether they are excluded.

In Black Consciousness discourse the man is in the position of “empowered

speaker” while the woman’s absence from the referent is symbolic of her place in Black Consciousness thought- which is that of the “powerless and voiceless” who plays largely ancillary roles in Black Consciousness leadership. The women who form part of the exception were often seen as “honorary men.”

Valerie Smith maintains that, “while the celebration of black man-hood came from the need to reclaim racial pride,” there is a tendency to marginalise the politics of black women. This masculinist discourse in fact inscribes the masculine experience of oppression and liberation. Black is consequently seen as male, and the struggle presented as one between black men and white men. In the same way that Black Consciousness activists reject white liberal attempts to speak for them, it is important to note that black men, preoccupied with their own concerns, cannot “reproduce the exact voice of the black woman (Smith 1989, 63).” Similarly, Dorothy Driver (1993) argues that despite Black Consciousness representation of blackness as a positive quality, it has been a black male consciousness; so that the onus is on black women to form a black women’s consciousness.

In the introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Deborah Cameron argues that language can be seen as both a reflection of sexist culture which

Black Consciousness discourse negated the diversity in experiences and aspirations of black women in all classes and working class people of both genders. At the same time, it also claimed the right to speak for them, about them and to know their experiences.

positions the speaker and a carrier of ideas that become so familiar due to "their constant re-enactment" that in the end we miss their relevance and significance (1992, 14). This is the case, she argues with the use of "he" and "man" to symbolise humanity, which in actual fact produces the male as norm (active, present)- woman as exception (passive, silent, other).

The undeviating use of "generic male" terms in Black Consciousness means that as part of the alienation process women are placed outside its language and discourse. By refusing to allow "them" on the political agenda, Black Consciousness rejects the politicisation of black women's experiences since this would entail extending attention to the specific experiences of exploitation that black women face(d). Exclusion from the language and space accorded to black men directly points to black women's secondary status within the movement. It is the ambiguous status of black women which allows them to be silenced. Their dual positioning as women and as black confined them to an anxiety between "feelings of self-identity and uniqueness" and therefore similar to all the other black people in the BCM on the one hand, and feeling "different" from the same group on the other (Jaworski 1992, 37).

Literature was seen as key to the successful dissemination of Black Consciousness ideals. As Miriam Tlali (in Seroke, 1981) maintains, "What I believe is that we can never be writers unless we reflect the true position of what is taking place and to carry the reader along with us." Literature was identified as key to the achievement of the psychological liberation necessary to transform society in Black Consciousness terms. The literary magazine, *Staffrider*, was to play a central role in this. Named after the commuters who ride illegally on the trains ("ride staff") between Johannesburg city centre and the townships, it was named after "black experience" and was to serve as part of the didactic arm of Black Consciousness. The scholar and *Staffrider* writer Mbulelo Mzamane (1991, 182) has argued that the magazine was "the most representative literary magazine of the Soweto era, the high-water mark of the Black Consciousness period." This has been echoed by Richard Rive, who refers to Black Consciousness writers as the "*Staffrider school*" (1982, 12), and Njabulo Ndebele (in Wilkinson 1992) who maintains that the magazine provided a creative forum for Black Consciousness

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inspired art. Furthermore, most of the artists and cultural groups who published in the magazine until 1982 explicitly aligned themselves with the BCM within the pages of the magazine and beyond (Gqola 1999, Oliphant 1991, Oliphant and Vladislavic 1988). The sexism which permeated the BCM was obvious in the literature it produced.

Don Mattera argues: Literature as armament for liberation will remain with us for as long as oppression and exploitation exist. Conversely, the literature of the privileged/ruling class is contrived to perpetuate the status quo through the indoctrination of its own class or systematic (and sophisticated) repression of the masses. In the literature of the privileged there is always room for romance, room for Wilbur Smith, Lessing, Michener and Barbara Cartland; room for those sensuously provocative bedside novels and tales of feminist trials (1988, 2-3).

The valuables of white society are up for rebuttal by Black Consciousness writers but this becomes a double-edged sword when one considers the fact that "feminist trials" are relegated to the same status as romance novels. If this was intended as a criticism on the feminism of white South Africa specifically up to that point, which effectively ignored the issues of race and class in women's lives (Lewis 1993; Maqagi 1990; Matlou 1986), this attitude would have some value. However, the contempt demonstrated here is a commentary on all anti-sexist theorisation. This is so because voices like that of Manoko Nchwe, who advocates a certain kind of "women's liberation" movement adapted to the needs of black South African

women, were in the minority (Nchwe quoted in Boitumelo 1979).

The establishment of a "Women Writers Speak" column in November/December 1979 meant that, for the first time in the two years in which the publication had been in circulation, an explicitly female voice was made audible. This is not to downplay the importance of Miriam Tlali's column *Soweto Speaking*, a regular feature in the magazine, or the submissions by women to the pages of the magazine thus far. While these are evidence of important and ground-breaking work, they did not explicitly explore the role or position of the woman writer specifically. However, the Women Writers Speak column provided the first declaration of women writers' commitment. In it, several women voiced their opinions on their role as black women writers.

For the writer Manoko Nchwe, an African woman writer has some priority in building herself to develop in her community, irrespective of the form of her art. Such a woman has a duty to trace the remains of her distorted culture, put them together and nourish them to be part of her.

The role of the woman writer is here seen as a custodian of a lost (or rapidly disappearing) culture. Hers is to seek the affirmation of her community. In addition to this, she needs to give "a direction" to the listener/reader of her words. It is Nchwe's opinion that a woman in her capacity as "a mother in her society, as the first teacher to her children and also an ordinary member of society is in a very good position to communicate with the people she writes for (Nchwe 1979, 60)." It appears from her assertion that the responsibility of a woman writer extends beyond her writing projects; that in a sense she is to mother her society, partly through teaching. This multi-faceted position is that which equips her with the ability to communicate with her readership as successfully as she does. What of the male writer then, since he is supposedly as effective, a factor which Nchwe herself alludes to when she speaks of Mtutuzeli Matshoba's words? Why does he not need to act in the same capacity to be as successful in his writing? Despite these inconsistencies it appears that Nchwe is, however, aware of the various factors which work to discourage women writing and publishing. She feels that contact between women writers may serve to encourage more to write, and to write more frequently. She speaks highly of Miriam Tlali's multi-pronged writing

projects. It is as much Tlali's own writing and her recording of others' voices for which she is commended here. In her writing, Miriam Tlali expresses not only herself, but allows others (who do not have the same access to writing as she) to come to voice.

It is important for women writers to write about those things which are important to them. These will inevitably include their own lives. Nchwe is outspoken about what she identifies as the need for women writers to be enlightened through "self-discovery." This is a concept she uses to mean "making other women aware of their value to the society, and how much they have to offer in all areas (Nchwe 1979, 60)."

It is important for a woman to write of the black women's experience and this will enable for instance a "woman in Soweto to understand what a woman in Gugulethu says (Nchwe 1979, 60)." Part of this is to "clarify the position of a woman in her society- and the only person who can do this is woman herself (Nchwe 1979, 60-1)." Indeed, Nchwe asserts that it is part of the woman writer's purpose to ensure that "the myth of female inferiority should be completely discouraged."

In the same article, acknowledging the need for African women to draw on the "ideology of women's liberation," Nchwe proceeds to question the manner in which this ideology "combines with our distorted culture." She announces that she does not know how this is to come about. Nonetheless, this introduces the possibility that feminist theory/ideology would need to be made relevant to the situation at hand. After all, Nchwe announces, "I do not expect a woman in South Africa to have the same demands as an American woman, as here the movement is still young (1979, 60)."

In the same article Boitumelo declares that women's liberation is beyond the relationship between man and woman. It is beyond being freed from man's oppression, but it is the first phase of our struggle to reaffirm our role in the struggle for total liberation. Accompanying these women's voices and declarations are poems by and about black women in Staffrider.

In the February 1980 issue Nokugcina Sigwili (later known as Gcina Mhlophe), echoes some of the sentiments expressed by Boitumelo and Manoko Nchwe. Sigwili too feels the need for women to write about a woman's experience of life. She feels, like Nchwe, that female creativity can take place in a communal

The ideology of the movement was fashioned and proceeded to operate without paying meaningful attention to the gendered nature of black experience.

setting and that this would serve to encourage prospective writers. Women's status as mothers is also highlighted by Sigwili to the point where it is seen as essential for manhood to exist. While men draw strength from their physical strength, Sigwili announces that, "our strength as women is our motherhood: men are always women's children. And their manhood doesn't show if women aren't there." Sigwili appears here to be arguing that women are important in part to ensure that men show their "manhood." Conversely, women's strength derives from the female ability to reproduce and be a mother. In both instances of strength outlined by Sigwili, women do not appear to need to be strong for themselves. Nor is it important for men to allow women to show their "womanhood," whatever that means. Although, by Sigwili's argument, if men need women for strength and definition, then women are self-sufficient.

Amelia House, writing from exile, interrogates the relevance of a women's page. She recognises that there are aspects of women's lives which only women can write about and that a women's page may pave some way towards establishing a female presence in the publication. On the other hand, however, she illustrates the manner in which this tendency can be counterproductive and limiting, especially since much of the discussion of women writers' roles has centred around mothering. She ends her contribution with the assertion that, "For the present it is necessary to observe that women do write and that there is diversity in their writing."

Miriam Tlali argues that she needed to be all that she could be to enable her to write. Having "reconciled" herself to all of these things, she maintains that for her "it was quite a task to write (Seroke 1981, 43)." She has also tried to organise for prospective women writers to come together. She has realised that "you find that they have all the willingness to try and write but they are not able to

do it because of all these impediments (Seroke 1981, 43)."

Boitumelo Mofokeng was to later lament the paucity of women artists in the celebration of the history of Staffrider. The numbers of women who contributed to the literary magazine were very low during its Black Consciousness phase. Additionally, women featured stereotypically in the short prose and poetry published in the magazine. Two tropes operate in the representations of women in Staffrider: supportive mothers in the vein of what Desiree Lewis (1991) has labelled phallic mothers; and sexually transgressive women who are inscribed consequently with the trope of rape by Staffrider narrators and writers (Gqola 1997). Since the magazine was said to present ideal sets of behaviour for its targeted black readers, the roles black women readers are guided towards are clear: support or abstention from transgressive behaviour. Furthermore, black female readers are invited "to help restore black masculinity which is seen as threatened by white power. Since black masculinity is equivalent to black pride, awareness of this masculinity as harmful is absent in these stories (Gqola 2001)."

Conclusion

It is clear that the ideal role of black women within Black Consciousness organisations and rhetoric is marked largely by silence and absence. The sexist nature of the BCM is unveiled in the discourses through which the possibilities for black liberation are articulated as well as in the literature it gives rise to. Women are excluded from naming and defining key sites of oppression. In this manner, Black Consciousness discourse restricts black women's entry into the political agenda and thus leaves their experiences unpoliticised. The celebration of the supportive, nurturing role from women involved in the movement is reflected in the unproblematised representations of stoic, supportive mother characters in Staffrider literature. As Lewis has illustrated.

Biko's gendered language is not simply incidentally sexist; at the centre of Black Consciousness thinking was an emphasis on the emasculation of black men and their need to cover a positive masculine identity. It is this that explains the marginalisation of women in its rhetoric, and in the ways in which women were appealed to mainly as psychological and material supports in male-oriented struggles (1994, 168-9). Where women like Mamphela Ramphele

Vino Cooper (left), Saths Cooper and Gwen Mokoape (right), members of the BCM outside court at the Inquest into Steve Biko's death



Picture courtesy of Museum Africa

were vocal in their rejection of prescriptions on female behaviour, the desired effect was not immediately apparent. Their behaviour challenged existing notions of appropriate black female participation in BCM. As the scholarship on Black Consciousness indicates, these women, who made their dissatisfaction known were in the minority. Instead of a realistic engagement with the implications of their interventions, these women were masculinised and accorded honorary male status. This marked them as exceptional, and thus ironically permitted meaningful discussions of gender in BCM.

The remainder of the female membership, however small in numbers, continued to occupy submissive and nurturing roles within the movement. While this does not immediately point to an absence of critical awareness of the oppressive nature of BCM gender politics in these women, it does highlight the contradictions which characterised the identity “black woman” in BCM. Ramphela (1998) has argued that there are various practices which serve to keep women silent and that these were operational in Black Consciousness. However, it also bears noting that, with no intention of being sexist or exclusive, men and women unquestioningly use masculinist language, and every time they do that, they are condon-

ing, validating, normalising the acts of excluding, marginalising and ignoring women. Thus the lack of intentionality is precisely the point; for it shows how pervasive the thought patterns of domination are. And, the horror of domination remains invisible because domination parades itself as truth, as nature. Its lifeline is complicity and support of those it dominates (Yates 1997, 144-5).

If those women who adhered to the naturalised patriarchal roles within BCM cannot be historically inscribed as helpless and hapless victims, their silence can be seen as a choice within the limited spaces and beliefs available to them, and people who choose blindness must be held accountable for their choice. Therefore, those subjected to systems of domination must become and remain cognisant, must be vigilant, and most importantly, must refuse silence, despite the madness, indeed precisely because of it (Yates 1997, 148).

The position of black women in the early BCM was characterised by ambiguity and contradiction. The ideology of the movement was fashioned and proceeded to operate without paying meaningful attention to the gendered nature of black experience. This remained the practice even as there were women in the movement whose very presence should have challenged the masculine

premise of Black Consciousness. Furthermore, the participation of women within the space named BCM in South Africa served to both confirm and challenge the black man-centred discourses of the movement. Because transgressive women were in the minority, their efforts led to a relegation to special status rather than a questioning of the underlying assumptions of the BCM. Finally, because black women occupied roles which were either supportive of, or challenging of the masculinist articulations of Black Consciousness, they worked against each other. The honorary men, by their numbers, “proved” their exceptional status in the face of apparent support from other black women. The space for the politicisation of black women’s experiences fell outside of the language of Black Consciousness. Consequently, the choices which presented themselves to the small numbers of women who were active in Black Consciousness were limited. They were sandwiched between the binaries of complicity or honorary male status. Either way the discourse of early Black Consciousness remained unchanged as articulated in what remained the rallying cry of BCM, “Black man, you are on your own.”

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